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ABSTRACT

Oral history, a branch of historical research, is defined as a method of gathering and preserving historical information in the spoken form and preserving these spoken words with modern technology. This booklet chronicles the development of oral history and describes the role of the Onondaga County (New York) Public Library's Betts Branch as custodian of the Onondaga Valley (Syracuse, New York) Oral History Project. This project's guidelines are presented in terms of: (1) preliminary steps; (2) required equipment and materials; (3) public awareness; (4) interview preparation; (5) interview process; and (6) methods of transcribing the interviews. A sample of the project's release form and a nine-item bibliography are included. (JHP)

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Oral History

A guide to methodology
including the case study,
Onondaga Valley Oral History Project

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Onondaga County Public Library
Syracuse, New York

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DEFINITION

Oral History is a method of gathering and preserving historical information in spoken form. Today, it combines the ancient technique of the spoken word with modern technology and is considered to have enduring value. Oral history is nothing more than a branch of historical research, but it gets deeper into the heart of history and answers such questions as "why?"

HOW DID ORAL HISTORY BEGIN?

Historian Allan Nevins in 1948 founded an oral history program at Columbia University, thus combining modern technology (the use of a tape recorder) with the ancient method of historical research: the collection of eyewitness accounts to history.

This method of using eyewitness accounts can be traced back to the ancient Greeks. Herodotus, called the 'Father of History,' worked mainly with personal reminiscences of living people in the events he described. In fact, in pre-literate societies, history was oral, passed down from generation to generation in such forms as the narrative, folktale and ballad.

In the latter part of the 19th Century, history had become a science of written analysis. Strangely enough many scholarly historians even distrusted the oral tradition, saying it was unreliable, subjective and unworthy of even being considered a valuable guide.

By the 1950's two technological developments helped to re-kindle and stimulate interest in oral history. They were the telephone and tape recorder. Allan Nevins pointed out that modern communications media were restricting the creation of personal documents, mainly letters and diaries, particularly the use of the telephone was cutting into letter writing. But history could be preserved with the help of the tape recorder. It is this combination of an ancient oral tradition and modern communication technology that makes oral history today.

A CASE STUDY: ONONDAGA VALLEY ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

In 1983, Onondaga County Public Library's Betts Branch in Syracuse, New York, undertook a new role -- custodian of the oral history of its surrounding Onondaga Valley section of Syracuse.

The gathering and transcribing of the rich history of Syracuse's South Side Onondaga Valley neighborhood was conducted by volunteers and trained library patrons.

Through the Onondaga Valley Oral History Project, transcripts of interviews with local figures of historic interest are filed and indexed at Betts Branch for the public's reference and research.

As well as being steeped in rich Onondaga Indian history, Onondaga Valley was the first permanent white settlement in Onondaga County in 1788. One of the town's first white settlers, Comfort Tyler, made his home on land presently housing the Betts Branch Library.

This project is registered with the American Historical Association, Library of Congress and Organization of American Historians.

Oral History

PROJECT GUIDELINES

PRELIMINARY STEPS

First, ask yourself some questions:

1. Is there an interest?
   Oral history collections are meant to be used. Visualize who will use it. Oral history involves time and money. If there is not enough interest to justify it, the project should not be started.

2. Does it have a focus? General or specific? A specific focus might be: The History of the Civil Rights Movement in Syracuse during the 1960's. A general focus could be: A History of the Valley Section of Syracuse.

3. Is funding available?
   Money will be needed for supplies and perhaps for personnel. Oral history can be a very suitable project for grant monies.

4. Do you have personnel to work on the project? Volunteer or paid?
   Personnel will be needed for interviewing, transcribing, organizing and maintaining the collection.

5. Who will oversee the project?
   One person should be in charge of the project and should have a committee of dedicated, interested helpers. It is recommended that the committee have an advisor who has expertise, such as a local historian or college professor.

EQUIPMENT AND MATERIALS

The following items are essential:

1. At least two tape cassette recorders with built-in microphones, capable of using an electrical outlet and also batteries.

2. An adequate supply of good quality cassette tapes, preferably thirty minutes on each side.

3. Release forms; see Appendix for sample.

4. Paper and folders or notebooks for printed transcripts. Cassettes may be kept in folders or separately.

5. Storage space. A cool, dry file cabinet can be used to insure the preservation of the tapes.

BEGINNING STEPS

1. Let the public know what you are planning. This may be done by having a 'birth announcement' in the local newspapers or an interview with the local electronic media.

2. Arrange an informational meeting for volunteers interested in the project. This is your opportunity to explain in person the focus and goals of the project, as well as the mechanics. Be sure to have sign-up sheets for volunteers -- one for those who wish to interview, another for those who wish to be interviewed.

MAINTAINING INFORMATION

1. Develop a system for scheduling interviews and arranging time for tape recorder use.
2. Always make a duplicate of a completed tape.
3. Determine the order in which you will keep the collection. Chronological? By subject? Aphabetically by interviewee?
4. Prepare a file with index cards for cross reference, such as name of interviewee, an assigned number, subject or key words.

PREPARING FOR THE INTERVIEW

An oral history interview is an interactive process. Therefore, adhering to a predetermined list of questions would ruin the flow of the interview. Each interview is special because of the interviewee's own personal style of remembering history as he or she witnessed it. Subjects to be discussed may be referred to before the interview. Examples of subjects include family background, education, work experience, hobbies, membership in clubs and organizations.

A more successful interview will result if the interviewee's background can be researched ahead of time. Also, the interviewer should have a pre-interview dialogue with the person to be interviewed. During the dialogue, the interviewer and interviewee may become better acquainted and the topics for the oral history interview may be briefly mentioned. That way there will be no surprises or misunderstandings on the day of the interview.

Part of this pre-interview dialogue should include an explanation of the goals and purposes of the oral history project. The legal aspects of the interview and the release form should be discussed. This release form assigns literary and property rights of the tape and transcript to the sponsoring institution. Without a signed release form, it is not ethical to make public the interview, because one does not have the legal right to share another person's reminiscences.

THE INTERVIEW

INTRODUCTION...The basis for a good interview begins with rapport between the interviewer and the interviewee. The quality of the interview often results from a truly cooperative participant who wants to be taped. And as mentioned before, the more the interviewer knows about the subject before the interview, the better it will go and the more new information will be uncovered.

The six basic questions for an oral history interview are: who? what? when? where? how? and why?

Before the interview, ask yourself, "What is the most important question I can fail to ask?" Be open to varying accounts from different interviewees discussing the same event because experience and memory shapes recollections differently. There may be pieces of truth in interviews with a number of people. One technique to get people to open up is to phrase some of your questions in a two-sentence format; indicate the relevance first and then ask the question. Let the interviewee know why it is worthwhile for him or her to tell what it was like in the past.

MECHANICS...It is important for the interviewer to know correct procedure for handling and using the tape recorder.

The interviewer should test the equipment in advance by talking into the recorder and playing it back. This enables him or her to check out the voice quality and make sure the recorder is running properly.

If one side of the tape is not used, the interviewer should mark it "not recorded." This will aid the transcriber.

If appropriate, the interviewer should ask the interviewee to spell a word or name that may be unclear to the transcriber.

THE INTERVIEW CONTINUED

TIPS:

1. Remember, try to obtain background information about the person you are interviewing.
2. The interviewer should tell the interviewee ahead of time that each side of the tape runs for 30 minutes and that at one point there will be an interruption in the interview while the tape is being changed.
3. The interviewer should write his or her name, the interviewee's name and the date on each side of the tape.
4. The interviewer should begin the interview by introducing him- or herself, the interviewee, and the date.
5. Ask brief questions phrased to require more of an answer than "yes" or "no." Ask one question at a time. Examples of open-ended questions are: Would you describe...? What was it like...? Tell me about....
6. Don't worry about periods of silence during the interview. Give the interviewee a chance to think about what he or she wants to say.
7. Don't interrupt even though the interviewee may run off on a tangent. A tangent may lead to further appropriate questions.
8. Avoid challenging information you believe to be incorrect.
9. Remember, this is an interview, not a dialogue. Don't do any more talking than is necessary.
10. Once the recorder has been switched on, try not to touch it unless absolutely necessary. Handling the recorder is distracting and may put the interviewee ill at ease.
11. Try to keep track of the time so you know when to change the tape. When you switch sides, continue the flow of conversation so nothing is lost.
12. Be a good listener!

TRANSCRIBING

Ideally, an oral history project includes typed transcripts of tape recorded interviews. Printed word has several advantages:

* It is accessible to the hearing impaired.
* It makes browsing possible.
* Researchers can find specific subjects more easily.

If planners of an oral history project decide to have both tape and transcript, the following factors must be taken into account.

1. The time factor. It is estimated that it takes 8-10 hours to transcribe one hour of tape.

2. The personnel factor. A qualified, knowledgeable typist is needed.

3. The cost factor. Expenses may be considerable. Employing a paid typist, generally, will be the most efficient way to go. If expert volunteers are available, costs will be greatly reduced.

4. The materials factor. Access to a typewriter or word processor (and paper and/or diskettes) will also be needed.

There are several methods of transcribing. One common method is using a dictaphone that has proper capabilities and a typewriter. More recently word processors or microcomputers with printers have become available. The most time-consuming approach is a long-hand transcription which is later typed.

In all cases, a duplicate of each tape should be made.

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ORAL HISTORY PROJECT RELEASE FORM

In view of the historical value of the material listed below, I _____, the narrator, and I, _____, the interviewer, each hereby, grant and assign all of our rights in the listed material to the Onondaga County Public Library for the furthering of historical studies, in consideration for which the library will maintain such materials for our use and benefit of its other patrons.
(List materials.)

_____ _____
narrator date

_____ _____
interviewer date

date received by the Library _____

received by _____
title

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